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Grazing CRP land improves feed, habitat

Abstract

This case study looked at a Decatur County farmer in Iowa who was able to graze land under contract in the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP), which is allowed by request under certain conditions. The controlled grazing helped supplement forage of other pastures and prepared the land for interseeding and other management practices.

Disciplines

Agriculture | Animal Sciences

Grazing CRP land improves feed, habitat

Grazing CRP Case Study Key Points

Rotational CRP Grazing:

- provides an economical source of forage to supplement other pastures when needed. The split grazing option offers timely rest to other pastures
- produces more insects, plant species and plant structure diversity than idle grassland, which helps grassland birds
- helps prepare land for interseeding and other CRP mid-contract management
- improves both food and cover for wildlife species in addition to birds, and improves quality of life



Grazing CRP land offers feed, improves habitat

Better wildlife habitat isn't the primary reason Kurt Hall grazes his Conservation Reserve Program land from time to time, but it is a result. He's grazing CRP



Kurt Hall

because he has more cows than he has pasture, and the CRP is available as a kind of insurance grass in years when he doesn't have enough pasture otherwise for his cows. He's been grazing CRP as he needs it for six years, and likes what grazing does for the stand and for his cattle operation. "You build a cow herd over time. Some years you have more grass, but then there are the years you're short of grass, and that's when you might need CRP," the Decatur County

farmer says. "You don't have to reduce your herd with CRP available. It's an insurance grass."

Hall didn't graze any CRP this year, but last year he grazed 50 acres in the spring and again in the fall.

Grass quality average to poor

"Our CRP grass quality is average to poor compared to our other pastures. We graze early when the cows are hungry for grass, and then wait until September when there's some new green growth. That fits the CRP grazing rules, and the cost is the same whether you graze once, or split grazing in spring and fall. We like the split because it gives us better quality forage," Hall says.

Hall uses temporary electric fences to rotate cattle within a CRP field.

"My cows respect the electric fence. They'll eat more when they're rotated through smaller pastures," he says. As CRP rules require, he takes a 25% re-

duction in his CRP annual payment on the acres he grazes in a particular year, which amounts to \$16 to \$21 an acre.

Graze before interseeding

Hall's CRP is orchard, brome, and fescue. He's interseeded clover into some of his CRP that has the mid-contract management requirement with an option to interseed legumes.

"You have to spray or disk before you interseed, but there's still a lot of material out there. So I grazed it down in the spring before I disked and put clover seed on," Hall says. "I still had to take the reduction in CRP payment for grazing, but grazing it close got it ready for disking and interseeding. The year after interseeding, clover really came on."

When his hay ground doesn't produce enough hay, Hall also makes hay on CRP ground. "You can get some green growth in September, which can help improve palatability," Hall says.



Hall would like to see the rules on managed grazing and haying of CRP changed. He says he's noticed that grazing CRP land allows more clover to grow. "You can only graze CRP once every three years. I've seen I have more clover in a CRP field the year after the cows have been in there. It makes better forage the next time I have a chance to graze it. It would really be better if I could graze it two years in a row—that's when the clover really shows up," Hall says.

Grazing improves habitat

Hall has been working with the local DNR wildlife specialist and the NRCS office.

"We were looking for a site to demonstrate how grazing and haying can improve CRP for wildlife, and we found it here," says Helga Offenburg, DNR private lands biologist. "You've got to have management in CRP. Grazing gives you more plant species diversity, and more diversity in plant height. Birds like that. Since cattle leave some areas of the field alone, you still have old material available for bird nesting. And since the cattle are out by mid-May, before nesting season, that's not an issue," she says.

"The year after grazing, I've seen a noticeable difference in the number of bugs and in the number of birds that eat them on Kurt's CRP land," says Kevin Reynolds, District Conservationist for NRCS in Decatur County. "Songbirds are everywhere. Grazing reduces the thatch that makes it so hard for young birds to get around in older CRP stands that haven't been disturbed. I think it's good for wildlife to graze every other year, or two out of three years, maybe even every year, as long as it's done at the right time."

Reynolds notes that the current limited grazing rules that allow early spring and late summer and fall grazing give grasses a lot of rest. "The soil and water are still well protected, and you get better wildlife habitat with grazing. Plus, the government gets

More forbs, legumes, and diversity with grazing

Comparisons on CRP land on the Kurt Hall farm in Decatur County show CRP with no management or disturbance (top) has heavy duff and is almost all fescue. It's thick grass is very difficult for small birds to navigate. CRP land that has been hayed only (center) is also primarily fescue. CRP that has been grazed and interseeded (bottom) has much more diversity, with forbs, legumes and native plants. The mixture is more open at ground level and provides plentiful insects for birds.



Nothing done



Haying only



Grazing and interseeding

some of the CRP payment back. And you help control woody vegetation. I'd like to see more grazing here," Reynolds says.

Offenburger doesn't believe annual grazing—and especially annual haying—of the same land is a good idea for wildlife. But she does support harder grazing at times to create more diversity. For instance, heavy grazing may be good to improve land for quail. Quail chicks need bare ground mixed with cover to escape from predators, so grazing hard periodically can be good for quail. Grazing only part of a field would still allow nesting nearby.

"Birds vary in how much grass cover they prefer," Offenburger says. "On one side of the spectrum, killdeer need a lot of bare ground; on the other, sedge wren need lots of dead material for successful nesting. And you've got everything in between."

Pair CRP owners with graziers

Reynolds, Offenburger, and Extension livestock specialist Joe Sellers are encouraging CRP owners without cattle—especially those who own CRP primarily for hunting and recreational use—to pair up with local livestock producers to graze their CRP as a wildlife management tool.

"Hunters see continuously grazed pastures and don't want that, but they don't realize that CRP land grazed by the rules improves both food and cover for wild turkeys and deer as well as songbirds," Offenburger says. "And if you want quail, cattle are your best friends," Reynolds notes.

"You can take the CRP payment reduction and graze someone else's cattle. If you can work out a fair way for payment for grazing, this is a way to get better wildlife habitat and to offer that extra feed to a cattle producer," Sellers says. "We'd like to get them together to talk."



Hall says grazing CRP benefits more than his cattle. "My family's quality of life is better for having more wildlife around," he says. "Our CRP is close to our house, and it's nice to hear birds singing in the morning."



CRP Grazing Rules in Iowa

You need to file a request with your county FSA office and get a modified conservation plan before grazing or haying CRP land. Grazing or haying is allowed once every 3 years, and will reduce CRP payments by 25% on the land grazed or hayed.

A split grazing option allows grazing from April 1 to May 14 and from

August 2 to September 30, grazing around birds' primary nesting season of May 15 to August 1.

The Managed Haying and a Managed Grazing Late options allow haying or grazing after August 2 for 90 days and 120 days, respectively.

Check with local FSA and NRCS offices for more details.

